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Notes on Covert Actions and the Denial of Empire
21 February 1988

"Chomsky writes ruthlessly and forensically about the operations of empire and about the cast of mind which underpins empire while simultaneously denying its existence. In a 1927 book, Men of Destiny, Walter Lippmann wrote: 'All the world thinks of the United States as an empire, except the people of the United States. We shrink from the word 'empire,' and insist that it should not be used to describe the dominion we exercise from Alaska to the Philippines, from Cuba to Panama, and beyond. We feel that there ought to be some other name for the civilizing work which do so reluctantly in these backward countries.'" [Christopher Hitchens, in Z, February 1988, p. 63, review of Chomsky's Culture of Terrorism.]

"One of the anomalies of the American Empire, as future historians will no doubt note with curiosity, is that the American people were hardly aware of its existence before they had to cope with the consequences of its demise. That we possess an empire--wealthier and more extensive than any hitherto known--is so taken for granted by the rest of the world as hardly to merit comment. We alone seem to find the notion surprising."

[Ronald Steel, review of Mortal Splendor: The American Empire in Transition, by Walter Russell Mead, in New Republic, Jan. 4 and 11, 1988, p. 32]

The near-identify of these two passages (especially given later comments by Steel) may reflect the fact that Steel is the admiring biographer of Walter Lippmann. Neither suggests a reason for this unawareness by the American public, nor how it is achieved and maintained. I suggest that this state of unawareness, of motivated and achieved ignorance--of "self"-deception?--is, in large part, the purpose and success of the secrecy system, and in particular of the covert actions capability centered in the Operations Directorate of the CIA. But to what end?

None, suggests Steel. It would seem that where the British Empire was acquired "in a fit of absence of mind," but later admitted and celebrated by the British, the US relations to its clients and dependencies not only originated but persist outside the awareness of the American public. And its government? Yes and no.

Certainly a bureaucrat dealing with a particular region knows many truths denied to the public about machinations inside other countries. Yet in contrast to Chomsky, I would say, from experience and observation from inside the government, that many of these same officials do maintain an "innocence," an ignorance, about the true nature of our relations to these countries--even while activating effectively to maintain them--and of the overall

pattern of our foreign relations. Their attitudes are shaped almost as much by lies (to them) maintained by secrecy as are those of the public, although the critical lies may be somewhat different ones, to counter certain facts known to them but withheld from the public.

And contrary to Steel, there is a reason for this. Steel says: "It is not evil to be an imperial power. Most of the illustrious states of history were, including Athens. But it serves little purpose to be one and insist that one is not." On the contrary, it serves considerable purpose, especially for Americans. First, citizens of the US understand our origins--and as well, our continuing cause, purpose, ideals, example--to be a rejection of empire, of domination from afar by an unrepresentative and unaccountable regime.

Second, whether it is or is not evil to "be" an empire--and Americans tend to think it is, as just noted--a great many things that imperial administrations find it necessary or expedient to do are evil by almost any sense of the word. Steel points out that "the costs and effects of empire are no less real for being unexamined." But they are very much more acceptable to a society that incurs them without examining them.

An imperial regime, like the U.S., that is nominally, and to some extent practically, accountable to a public that holds conventional moral standards and tends to be intolerant of "reasons of empire" as a justification for breaking these standards, has very strong reason to deny that it is an empire and to deny much of what it is doing to remain one.

To plan and to do these things in a way that its political bosses can "plausibly deny" responsibility for them is the work of CIA, specifically of its Operations Directorate for which the overall CIA provides an "intelligence" cover.

Note that "plausible denial" is not the same as, and does not demand, total secrecy, absolute ignorance in the public, absence of challenge or contrary evidence. It means that such evidence of the true facts as is available to the audience that is to be misled--primarily, the American public--is successfully countered by lies, silences, and (in the magician's sense) misdirection managed by American "authorities," in and out of government.

It is helpful to this effort to manipulate and deceive that what is being falsely denied are propositions that the public wishes not to think about and not to believe, about the actions, aims, values and character of "its" government. If it were to believe these facts--if the charges of foreigners and domestic "radicals" (so defined in large part because they tend to see and assert such realities) were to seem more "plausible" than the authoritative denials--the government would lose much of its legitimacy and authority, and these specific policies would

challenge the public to acts not only of dissent but of resistance. That is precisely why the government conceals and denies them; but it is also the reason why the task is doable, why it is as easy as it is to mislead even a public, as in the U.S., which has available to it a considerable amount of counter-evidence.

There is also the fact of a long history of successful denial of like instances and related realities, so that a particular governmental lie fits in harmoniously with the preconceptions and assumptions of its audience. That is, what the government says sounds familiar, inherently plausible, as well as reassuringly comfortable.

Contrary "charges" sound like others that were "discredited"--by plausible denials--in the past, and that would be agonizingly challenging to risky resistance if they were accepted. And they come, by definition, from critics who are not "responsible", in the sense suggested by Edward Herman (Z, February, p. 37): "'Responsible' may be defined as follows: 'Pertaining to the form but not the substance, as in 'responsible criticism'. Also, starting from the premise that those wielding power seek benevolent ends on the basis of superior knowledge.'"

(Likewise, see the meaning of "honorable men," as used by Helms and Colby to refer to the high officials of CIA.)